

Frederick Jackson Turner:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN HISTORY

IN a recent bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890 appear these significant words: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." This brief official statement marks the closing of a great historic movement. Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.

Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and politi-

cal conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. Said Calhoun in 1817, "We are great, and rapidly—I was about to say fearfully—growing!" So saying, he touched the distinguishing feature of American life. All peoples show development; the germ theory of politics has been sufficiently emphasized. In the case of most nations, however, the development has occurred in a limited area; and if the nation has expanded, it has met other growing peoples whom it has conquered. But in the case of the United States we have a different phenomenon. Limiting our attention to the Atlantic coast, we have the familiar phenomenon of the evolution of institutions in a limited area, such as the rise of representative government; the differentiation of simple colonial governments into complex organs; the progress from primitive industrial society, without division of labor, up to manufacturing civilization. But we have in addition to this a recurrence of the process of evolution in each western area reached in the process of expansion. Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social

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THE TURNER THESIS
CONCERNING THE ROLE OF THE
FRONTIER IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Problems in American Civilization

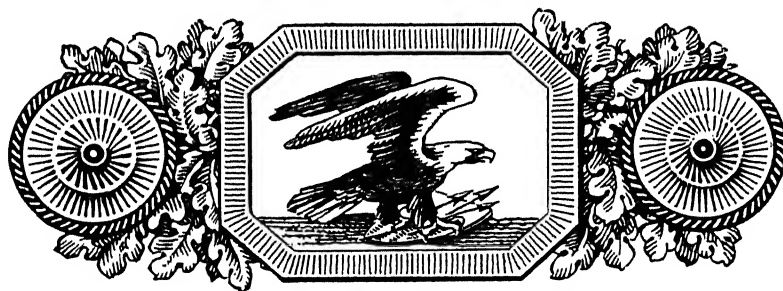
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The Turner Thesis

CONCERNING THE ROLE OF THE
FRONTIER IN AMERICAN
HISTORY

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

George Rogers Taylor

Problems in American Civilization

READINGS SELECTED BY THE
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INTRODUCTION

BY the close of the nineteenth century the United States had become a major world power, and now at the middle of the twentieth century this country has achieved a position of world leadership. Today no nation can compare with us in economic productivity and living standards; only Russia rivals us in military power. Yet despite our development into an industrial and political colossus, we maintain in most of our customs and institutions a republican form of government and a democratic spirit. How have we been able to do this? What are the factors which have shaped our growth and molded our character? Where shall we look for a meaningful explanation of our history?

Theories designed to interpret historical development, though they deal with the past, are significant chiefly in helping us to understand the problems of the present and the future. This is why in every age a nation needs to rewrite its history. Today international questions loom large and there is a strong tendency to condemn what is regarded as the narrow nationalism of the past. Yet the role which the United States plays on the world stage today and will play tomorrow, the policies which we adopt and the contributions which we bring to world councils, will be determined in no small part by our understanding and interpretation of our own past. It is for this reason that the current controversy over the Turner thesis is important.

Writing during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century, Frederick Jackson Turner developed a new approach to American history, an interpretation which has come to be known as the frontier hypothesis or the Turner thesis. Earlier American historians had written mainly from the point of view of the eastern seaboard. Their emphasis had been on European influences and colonial origins. Constitutional issues, especially those which arose between the North and the South and culminated in the Civil War, had claimed major attention. Turner sought a fresh point of view, a more meaningful approach to an understanding of the new America which had become continental in extent and whose frontier was, after nearly three hundred years, finally being closed.

As to what the frontier thesis is, we can well afford to let Turner speak for himself in the first two readings in this volume, which contain the gist of his new approach. The first essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," was read before the American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893. Though he was only thirty-two years old and recently out of graduate school, Turner in this paper, which has become the most widely known essay in American history, revolutionized historical thought in the United States. To the theme of this early address he recurred again and again in later writings, often

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stressing in particular the role which the frontier had played in stimulating the growth of democracy in this country. One of his best-known works with this emphasis is an essay written in 1903 entitled "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," which appears as the second item in the present volume.

In the thirty years following Turner's announcement of his brilliant thesis of 1893 the whole center of gravity of American historical writing and teaching shifted. Almost overnight his ideas captured the imagination of American historians and set them, for a generation, to studying the frontier and interpreting American development in relation to the opening of the West. The number of his disciples was increased by his extraordinary personal influence as a teacher of history at Wisconsin and Harvard, mentioned in several of the selections in this volume. A student of Turner's and one of the leading historical scholars of our time, Carl Becker, has this to say of him:

Three qualities of the man's mind made upon me a profound and indelible impression. These qualities were: a lively and irrepressible intellectual curiosity; a refreshing freedom from personal preoccupations and didactic motives; a quite unusual ability to look out upon the wide world in a humane and friendly way, in a fresh and strictly independent way, with a vision unobscured by academic inhibitions. These are also the qualities, I think, which have enabled him to make an "original contribution" (not so common a performance as is often supposed) to the study of American history.¹

The followers of Turner, his students, grand-students, associates, and a host of

¹ "Frederick Jackson Turner" in *American Masters of Social Science*, Howard W. Odum, ed. (New York, 1927), p. 295. This quotation is reproduced by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

others who fell under his influence, multiplied until they almost monopolized historical scholarship in this country. Many made learned and detailed studies of specific aspects of frontier history. Others restated and developed the master's approach. One of the best known of these frontier historians was Frederic L. Paxson, long a teacher of history at the University of Wisconsin, where he succeeded Turner when the latter moved to Harvard, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1925 for his *History of the American Frontier*. Our third reading is an essay by Paxson dealing with the role of the West in the Turner tradition.

The Turner thesis reigned almost unchallenged until the early 1930's. Since then a growing revolt has spread as one scholar after another has trained his heaviest guns on various aspects of the frontier hypothesis. The readings provide a sampling of the chief criticisms which have been raised. In the fourth selection Benjamin F. Wright, Jr., until recently Professor of Government at Harvard University, directs his attack primarily against Turner's view of the frontier as a democratizing influence in our history. The safety-valve theory—the proposition that the availability of free land on the frontier served to allay economic discontent in the East—is generally regarded as a significant part of the frontier thesis, although Turner emphasized it less than some of his followers did. To this doctrine Professor Fred A. Shannon of the University of Illinois, a leading economic historian, pays his respects in the fifth selection. The sixth essay illustrates the attack on Turner by those who rebuke him for what he does not do, for his failure, as they believe, to see the significance of such forces as urbanization, the industrial revolution, and the rise and importance of "basic class an-

tagonisms." One of the ablest of these critics, Professor Louis M. Hacker of Columbia University, here condemns Turner for his neglect of certain economic factors which he believes worthy of major emphasis. In the seventh essay, Professor George Wilson Pierson of Yale University subjects the frontier hypothesis to a general re-examination and overhauling. In the last of the selections from Turner's critics, Professor Carlton J. H. Hayes of Columbia University ascribes the intellectual isolationism of this country in part at least to the influence of the frontier hypothesis.

In the final selection the followers of Turner are permitted a rebuttal. There Avery Craven, a student of Turner at Harvard and now Professor of American History at the University of Chicago, joins battle with the critics.

What is the upshot of all this controversy? Must Turner's frontier thesis now be abandoned as a useless, perhaps even a dangerous, hypothesis? Or does Turner's work still stand in its essentials despite the savage attacks which have been made upon it during the past fifteen years? This is the problem presented by the readings in this volume.

Some honestly believe that the last word has been spoken, that the frontier hypothesis is now as dead as the dodo. Others remain unimpressed by the sound and fury of the attack, holding that, though clarification is desirable and some amendments should be made, the Turner thesis provides today a sound and useful approach for those who seek to understand our past in order better to meet the problems of the present.

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THE CLASH OF ISSUES

The thesis:

"The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."

"The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."

— FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

A statement by a leading disciple of Turner:

"The frontier hypothesis presents the most attractive single explanation of the distinctive trends of American history."

— FREDERIC L. PAXSON

But the critics say:

"Only by a study of the origins and growth of American capitalism and imperialism can we obtain insight into the nature and complexity of the problems confronting us today. And I am prepared to submit that perhaps the chief reason for the absence of this proper understanding was the futile hunt for a unique 'American spirit' which Frederick Jackson Turner began forty years ago and in which he involved most of America's historical scholars from that time until now."

— LOUIS M. HACKER

"In what it proposes, the frontier hypothesis needs painstaking revision. By what it fails to mention, the theory today disqualifies itself as an adequate guide to American development."

— GEORGE WILSON PIERSON